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Thoughtful

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Trump vs. Comey: Hope Against Hope

Anthony Lane June 9, 2017

So where do the hopes that James Comey cited yesterday, in his own utterances and in his reports of others' speech, belong?

So where do the hopes that James Comey cited yesterday, in his own utterances and in his reports of others' speech, belong?PHOTOGRAPH BY GABRIELLA DEMCZUK FOR THE NEW YORKER

As every scrap of James Comey's testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee is pored over and picked apart, one word gleams brighter than any other. That word is "hope." It is a common word, employable as both a noun and a verb, and it boasts an extraordinary breadth. We may say, "I hope to catch the 6:42 A.M.," or "I hope the kids don't catch a cold," and, at the other end of the spectrum, Christians are exhorted to pray "for all who have died in the hope of the Resurrection." So where do the hopes that Comey cited yesterday, in his own utterances and in his reports of others' speech, belong?

First, we have his homely dictum, which is already destined to wind up on a thousand T-shirts, or in the chorus of a country ballad: "Lordy, I hope there are tapes." He was referring, of course, to President Trump's ineffable boast, in a tweet, on May

Yesterday, of course, to President Trump's inevitable beauty, in a tweet, on May 12th: "James Comey better hope that there are no 'tapes' of our conversations before he starts leaking to the press!"

Now, even though the two men were using "hope" in the same grammatical construction, the difference in mood could not be more pronounced. Comey was upbeat, and even lightly amused, whereas the President's words are dark with menace—so dark, indeed, that they come across as amusing. For a start, there are those tacky, guess-what-I-know quotation marks around "tapes," but more distinctive is the word "better," wielded as an intensifier. With that single addition, Trump makes it clear that his dearest wish, as a rhetorician, is to switch into fluent villainese. "You'd better hope I don't make it back," the unfazeable Snake Plissken says, in "Escape from New York," and Jay Z, in the tender lyrics to "Gangsta Shit," informs us that "you better hope this money don't catch fire." However you dish up the phrase, it carries the aroma of threat.

This brings us back to yesterday, and to the conversation that, according to Comey, took place in the Oval Office on February 14th. In his sworn testimony to the Committee, he described how the President, having asked the Vice-President, the Attorney General, and Jared Kushner to leave the room, spoke about Michael Flynn, who had recently been fired as the national-security adviser, and who was—and remains—under investigation by the F.B.I. for possible links with Russia. In Comey's account, Trump said, "I hope you can see your way clear to letting this go, to letting Flynn go. He is a good guy. I hope you can let this go."

Here we come to the heart of the hoping. The most obvious response would be that provided by T. S. Eliot, in "East Coker": "I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope / For hope would be hope for the wrong thing." But those words, though wise, might not cut much ice in the Oval Office. Has there ever been a room, anywhere, in which souls were less free to be still?

There is no denying the drama of what occurred there, in February, and my colleague Jeffrey Toobin offers a cogent reading of the scene: "The President is instructing his subordinate to stop an F.B.I. investigation of Trump's close associate." Such a command constitutes "an obstruction of justice," Toobin says. For what it's

worth, I would agree with him, though others would not, and one of the first to spring to the President's defense was his son Donald Trump, Jr., who took to Twitter and parsed the reported encounter in his own fashion. "I hear 'I hope nothing happens but you have to do your job,' " he wrote, describing the President's words as "very far from any kind of coercion or influence and certainly not obstruction!" He went on, "Knowing my father for 39 years when he 'orders or tells' you to do something there is no ambiguity, you will know exactly what he means," and concluded, "Hoping and telling are two very different things, you would think that a guy like Comey would know that."

You could admire this response for its demonstration of filial loyalty, or mock it for splitting hairs, but beware: in matters of this gravity, some of those hairs will not be brushed away so easily. The splitting matters, just as it does in libel cases or in the alibis produced in a criminal trial, and you could sense the first hint of a split as Comey's account of that particular exchange came to an end. He was questioned by Senator James Risch, of Idaho, a Republican, who asked, "Do you know of any case where a person has been charged for obstruction of justice or, for that matter, any other criminal offense, where they said or thought they hoped for an outcome?" Comey replied, "I don't know well enough to answer."

That sound you hear right now is the excited rustling and squeaking emitted by professors of semantics, all across the land. In the coming days, they are going to have themselves a ball. If anyone knows well enough to answer, they do, and, in the process, they will be honoring the example of many distinguished philosophers who have worried away at the fine cracks that open up between concepts such as hoping, wishing, promising, ordering, and intending. J. L. Austin, the author of "How to Do Things with Words," delivered a paper called "Other Minds" in 1946, in the course of which he said:

> When I say "S is P," I imply at least that I believe it, and, if I have been strictly brought up, that I am (quite) sure of it: when I say "I shall do A," I imply at least that I hope to do it, and, if I have been strictly brought up, that I (fully) intend to. If I only believe that S is P, I can add '"But of course I may (very well) be wrong:" if I only hope to do A, I can add "But of course I may (very well) not."

So, that's all cleared up. Leaving aside the delightful archaism of being "strictly brought up," and the conviction—one might almost say the hope—that such strictness will necessarily issue in correct speech, it seems that, for Austin, a hope is something less than a promise, and is contained within it, and that to "only hope" is to lessen the likelihood that the promise will be carried out.

The sadness is that Austin never had to square up to Donald Trump, who knows all kinds of things—the *best* things—to do with words. That being said, could his tweeting son have been on the right track, or at any rate, the cunning track, when he focussed on the gap between hoping and telling? I would suggest, assuming the role of devil's advocate (a literal appointment, as far as Trump's opponents are concerned), that the linguistic fuzz that surrounds "hoping to" and "hoping that" is so dense, and so open to counterargument, that no lawyer, acting for the President, would hesitate to take advantage of it. He may well have been channelling Snake Plissken, in claiming to "hope" that Flynn would not be probed any further, but can one prove, beyond all reasonable doubt, that Trump was being Snake-like? Would any legal team appointed to act on his behalf not play things entirely straight, indicate that a hope is a hope and nothing but, and leave the matter at that? Who could block such a play? If there *were* a tape of the President's words, we might have a tone to listen to and assess, but tone alone is notoriously hard to proffer as hard evidence, either for the prosecution or for the defense. "Are you a party in this business?," a character is asked in "The Winter's Tale." He replies, "In some sort, sir: but though my case be a pitiful one, I hope I shall not be flayed out of it." The character has no name. He is simply called the Clown.